



# Discover Your **Persuasive Story**

**By Edward Wachtman and Sheree Johnson**

Creating a persuasive story begins with understanding your audience; not merely what they want, but what they feel and why.

**M**ore and more, marketers are acknowledging the persuasive power of stories. After all, they are the fundamental form of human communication. We've told stories for timeless generations; our brains are hard-wired to respond to them. (For more on this aspect of stories, see *The Persuasive Power of Story*, Wachtman and Johnson, *Marketing Management*, Jan/Feb 2009).

However, some stories are more persuasive than others. What makes a story persuasive? What makes it a valuable marketing technique? It is the emotional connection a story creates with its audience. A generation of neurological research shows that many of our so-called rational behaviors are strongly influenced by our emotions. If we want consumers to behave in ways that benefit our brand or product, we need to create an emotionally compelling story.

Whether our audience is customers, prospects, employees or the general public, they all have stories about us. These stories are rich with clues and insights about what is meaningful and emotionally compelling about our category, our brand or our company. Developing a persuasive story begins with understanding our audience—not merely what they want, but what they feel and why. So, how can we get to this deep level of emotional understanding?

## Persuasive Story Elements

Many leading companies today are using the power of narrative analysis as an extremely effective technique for achieving this understanding. Narrative analysis is powerful because it is through narrative or story that we are able to speak about those emotions that are most meaningful to us. (For the purposes of this article we will use the words "story" and "narrative" interchangeably.) Try to describe emotions like love, loyalty or friendship without telling a story. It is difficult, and we generally end up with lists that are not especially insightful. Now describe the same words by telling a story. Here we begin to see nuances, subtleties, themes and so on, which help us understand what these words really mean.

Imagine what we might learn if we had several hundred stories about the same concept, such as loyalty. We would see recurring patterns. Certain themes would stand

out; a common plot would emerge. We might begin to see similar words and phrases used again and again. One singular, deeply meaningful story about loyalty would start to materialize; one that encompasses the emotions of the hundreds of stories that we began with. This is the power of narrative analysis, and it is a critical component of discovering a persuasive story.

To identify this deep and meaningful story, we must first deconstruct the hundreds of stories into their various elements (see Exhibit 1 on page 24.):

- **Plot.** This is the action element of the story: What happens, what happens next—and most importantly, why. It is the fundamental structure of the story that provides critical clues to an underlying mythic or archetypal story. We can think of the plot as an emotional map with ascending, descending or static emotional movement.
- **Themes.** These complete the statement: "This is a story about \_\_\_\_." These themes provide additional emotional context for the plot.
- **Meta-story.** This element is the overarching story that describes what the themes and plot are all about.
- **Dramatic tensions.** These are the conflicts that must be resolved. These tensions are the source of emotional energy for the audience. If there is no dramatic tension, there is little emotional involvement; nobody cares.
- **Symbolism.** This is the use of an image to represent an idea. For example, an owl symbolizes wisdom, the phoenix symbolizes rebirth and the dove symbolizes peace.

Examining each of these elements independently helps us understand the emotionally deeper meaning of the story, especially if we have hundreds of people writing individual stories about an identical topic. We begin to see commonalities across all of these elements: a common plot, similar themes, dramatic tensions and symbolism. From these we can infer—with confidence—a common meta-story. Where once there were many stories with shared commonalities, we now have one story. More importantly, this one story can have multiple levels of understanding—with each level contributing to its persuasiveness.

## EXECUTIVE briefing

Every day, we face the daunting challenges of finding a competitive edge, discovering new ways of reaching people, capturing their attention, and most importantly persuading them to take action.

In order to get people to act, we must engage them emotionally. A highly effective way to do this is through the persuasive power of stories. Discovering what makes a story persuasive begins with first understanding our audience at a deeply emotional level.

### Message, Meaning and Myth

Over the years, our research has identified three distinct levels of understanding, each persuasive in a different way. Combined, they provide the basis for a very powerful, very persuasive story. These three levels are: message, meaning, and myth (see Exhibit 2).

**Message.** This level is rational, logical and top of mind, and communicates what consumers need to know about our brand or product. How do we compare to other brands in the category? How are we different? Message is about communicating facts, information, features and benefits. Looking at Nike, for example, the message is straightforward: Nike makes top quality athletic gear, used by the best athletes—and is constantly pushing the envelope of innovation. A strong message is necessary, because it provides a reason to buy. It is not sufficient, because it lacks emotional power—and the persuasiveness that goes with it.

**Meaning.** This is a deeper level of communication. It addresses personal feelings and beliefs. This is the level of emotional participation, where the story invites the consumer to personally identify with our brand. At this level of communication, the consumer's story and our brand story merge into one. Communicating meaning must be subtle. This is most persuasively done using images and words that emotionally resonate at a deep and personal level.

Again referring to Nike, communicating meaning is about my hard work, perseverance and personal achievement. It is a personal story about attempting to do the hard things, doing them as best I possibly can and the feeling of pride and satisfaction that results.

**Myth.** This is the deepest, most powerful, most persuasive level of communication. When communicating at this level, we are stimulating unconscious, universal and timeless images that have a very subtle but profound influence on how we think and feel. Communicating our brand story using one of these universal stories allows us to speak to consumers at the deepest, most meaningful and persuasive level.

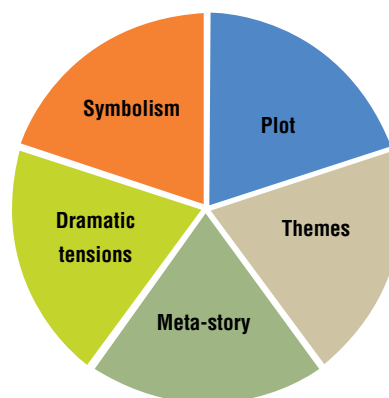
Again examining Nike, we can see how the level of myth is persuasive and emotionally powerful. Here we are dealing with an ancient and archetypal image: the hero. This is the story of an ordinary person who heeds a call to action ("Just do it"), faces difficult tests, struggles with his or her inner de-

mons relentlessly yelling to quit, is helped by some mentor or guardian—in this case Nike—and ultimately achieves the goal, returning to the everyday world transformed (initiated into the world of those who can "do it") to share what was learned.

What makes this mythic image so persuasive? The hero's journey is a reenactment of our own personal growth and development. We must leave our youthful and safe ways, and venture into an impersonal and dangerous world. We must work hard, learn, fail, feel despair and finally achieve success—and the authentic sense of who we are. The hero's story is imprinted in our unconscious, and we are drawn to anything that is associated with it—even such mundane items as athletic equipment!

To fully appreciate the persuasive power of myth, it is important to understand that scholars in the fields of literature, narratology (the study of narrative) and myth generally agree that there are a limited number of stories in our human experience. These stories reappear throughout history and across cultures. The specific content of these stories may vary but the underlying structure—the essence of the stories—remains the same. These mythic, universal stories are the source of very powerful, emotional energy and therefore strongly influence how we behave—both individually and collectively. We saw how Nike has capitalized on the hero story. Following are

### ■ Exhibit 1



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examples of some other of these stories and companies/brands that successfully make use of them:

- **Cycle of life.** The story of birth, death and ultimate rebirth. We experience this story in the changing of the seasons, the coming and going of generations and the old passing on their wisdom and experience to the young. It is a story of hope and optimism; there is no end, just new beginnings. Ford played on this story in a TV commercial depicting a father teaching his son about the joys of driving a Mustang. In 2005, Ford depicted Steve McQueen—resurrected in digitized form—being handed the keys of a Mustang by a wide-eyed and awed farm worker. The symbolic significance of this image is that Mustang is timeless, classic; it has been with us for a long time, and will be with us even longer.
- **Creation.** How the world—and humankind—came into being. In our western tradition, we read about it in the Bible's Genesis. In the native tradition of the Northwest, it is exemplified in the story of the Raven's discovery of the People under a clam shell. A number of brands are known not only by what they do, but how they came into being. Their creation stories are part of their brand identity, and part of their success. We can almost picture the two Steves, Jobs and Wozniak, ensconced in a garage, toiling over the first Apple computer. Then there is the story of how Post-it® Notes came into being, the result of a serendipitous 3M "mistake."
- **Creation from destruction.** A variation on the creation story, this story includes Noah's flood and the phoenix rising from the ashes. It is the story of renewal. Coca-Cola

Classic is an interesting example. In 1985, Coca-Cola, amid much publicity, attempted to change the formula of the drink with "New Coke." Coca-Cola management was unprepared for the public outcry. As a result, they resurrected the original formula under the name Coke Classic. The rest is history.

- **The battle of good and evil.** This story finds its roots in the episodic battles between chaos and order in the early legend of the Sumerians (located in what was known as the cradle of civilization). Today, we see an effective, tongue-in-cheek variation of this story in Apple's commercials depicting Mac and the PC.

Finding and communicating the story of our company, brand or product that is most closely associated with a deep, emotionally laden, mythic story is the secret to a very powerful and persuasive communication. To illustrate, the following is a brief example of how a new story was discovered, in order to help businesses communicate and market their efforts in support of sustainability.

## A Story Discovery Illustration: Sustainability

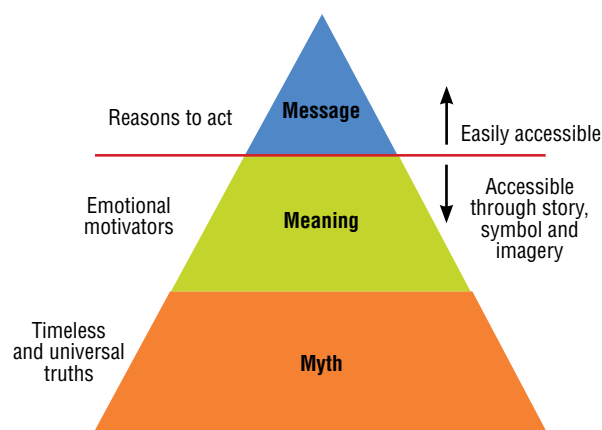
Addressing issues of global climate change and the environment is a major marketing challenge. No matter what products or services we provide, more and more consumers are expecting us to be green. What is the story we need to tell to persuasively communicate our sustainability efforts, and demonstrate that we genuinely care about environmental issues?

In the fall of 2005, James Hoggan and Associates (a Vancouver, BC-based communications firm) coordinated and led the Sustainability Research Initiative (SRI): the most comprehensive inquiry to date of Canadian attitudes on sustainability. As part of the research, five storytelling sessions were conducted, with close to 100 people participating. More than 250 hand-written pages of individual stories were collected for analysis. All of the stories were prompted by the same stimulus: a phrase related to the concept of sustainability.

**Key story elements.** Although emotionally rich and positive in tone, many of the stories were tinged with a vague sense of discontent, conveying an uneasy feeling that things are not quite right, we are out of balance and —individually and collectively—have lost our way. Yet these were not stories of hopelessness and despair. In many, we observed a defining moment of understanding or awakening, when the teller becomes aware that he or she—or we, collectively—is not doing the right things. This awakening triggers a deep-seated awareness: We need to re-find our way. Exhibit 3 shows the plot and the events that comprise it; note the emotional ups and downs. It is important to note that the story does not end, until those who have awakened and transformed have returned to share what they've learned with others.

### ■ Exhibit 2

Levels of communication: message, meaning, myth



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From nearly a hundred individual stories, we identified five recurring themes—each emotionally powerful. These are the core themes of the new sustainability story:

- **Interconnectivity.** There is a larger scheme that connects us in time with those who came before us, and those who will follow. In addition, our behavior affects others as their behavior affects us. This interconnectivity provides a sense of personal meaning: I matter, and my presence makes a difference.
- **Reconciliation.** It is time to re-evaluate what is genuinely important to us. We need to restore balance within ourselves, our communities and the world. We must fix what is broken.
- **Community.** The age-old need for belonging is achieved through community, providing a sense of personal identity and worth. From this, we acquire the courage to act.
- **Epiphany.** This is the moment of sudden and absolute clarity, when we realize that we must do things differently. After this awakening, we view the world—and our role in it—from an entirely different perspective.
- **Transformation.** This is about fundamental change. We reach a state of certainty about what really matters in our lives. There is no equivocation or doubt; everything is as it should be. Where there was conflict, now there is harmony; where there was emptiness, there is now fulfillment and wholeness.

As we noted, epiphany and transformation are also key plot-elements, reinforcing their emotional power in creating a persuasive story.

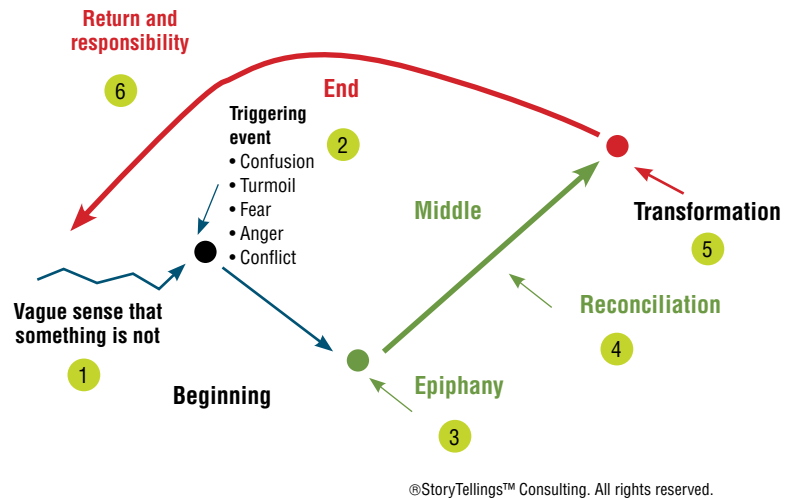
The meta-story is “hope.” Although some negative characteristics—death, disease, ill-will, anger, frustration and so on—are often present in the stories, there is always a glimmer of hope. We can fix what is broken, re-find our path and the future will be better. Hope is a powerful human emotion. By linking sustainability to this hopeful emotional space, we can move from the scolding negative to the confident and empowering positive.

**Message, meaning and myth.** The three levels of understanding and communicating the new sustainability story are highlighted here. To be persuasive, all three levels must be addressed in some way when telling our story.

**Message.** Sustainability requires trade-offs between costs and potential benefits; we have to make choices. These choices—and the change they require—are everyone’s responsibility. Small steps by a few dedicated people can initiate change. But in the long term, change must come from our communities, governments and big business.

**Meaning.** The most persuasive stories touch us at a deeply

**Exhibit 3**  
Plot structure of sustainability



emotional level, and influence how we behave in doing so. Three emotionally powerful dimensions emerge from the research; we see glimmers of them in the plot and themes. They are interrelated, and sometimes overlap as illustrated in Exhibit 4.

- **Quest for meaning and fulfillment.** We want our lives to be more than a semi-sleepwalk through our day-to-day routines; hence the recurring presence in the stories of awakening and epiphany. At this awakening, we begin to see how our lives fit into a larger scheme, spanning time and space. What we do does matter.
- **We are in this together.** There is much we can do individually, but it is the emotional support of others that provides the motivation for continuing when the going gets tough. This is the essence of community: people working together, sharing and feeling the safety and security of belonging.
- **Make it right; make it whole.** We are dysfunctional as individuals and communities. We are over-burdened with goals, responsibilities and expectations that add nothing to our desire for fulfillment and meaning. We are torn by competing commitments. There is always another goal to strive for, and another responsibility to accept. And all the while, we have a vague notion that we are going nowhere. We need to make things right for ourselves, our communities and everyone and everything we touch. We must repair those things we have damaged, either intentionally or by mistake. This is our new path: a path of healing and reconciliation, ending in transformation and responsibility.

**Myth.** The plot and core themes of our new sustainability stories point to a very fundamental mythic story: rebirth and

regeneration. This story resonates deeply in our collective psyche. Many of our most popular symbols and traditions—the Christmas wreath, harvest festivals, birthday celebrations and anniversaries—are contemporary expressions of this myth. Each of these is a manifestation of hope, and an acknowledgment of our fundamental connection with what came before and what follows.

**Marketing and communication implications of the new sustainability story.** Through the narrative analysis of more than a hundred individual stories, we were able to reconstruct one very persuasive story about sustainability. And we were able to make some clear recommendations about marketing and communicating that story. Here are a few:

**Mirror the plot.** When telling our sustainability story, we can benefit by mirroring the plot structure identified in this research. It is especially important to acknowledge the confusion, turmoil, fear and so on of the triggering events. No person or business is perfect. Mistakes and false starts are all part of the human experience. Similarly, most businesses do not wake up one morning with a fully developed and actionable sustainability plan. They struggle, fail and try again. It is through trial and error that we learn and grow. We recognize this in ourselves, and will accept it in a business that authentically wants to transform itself.

**Appeal to consumers' desire for meaning and fulfillment.** People want to make a difference. They want to believe—hope—that their time here matters. When we incorporate the key story elements discovered in the research—especially the core themes of interconnectivity, reconciliation and community—we are speaking the language of meaning and fulfillment.

**Be a hopeful solution to the cultural malaise.** Instead of reporting the overused doom-and-gloom scenarios, we might try positioning sustainability as a possible panacea for our

collective cultural malaise. Our sustainability story should not be about giving up and sacrificing, but about letting go of those activities and distractions that add stress and detract from personal and communal meaning. Sustainability can be about putting more ease into our hectic lives. It can be hope for a more authentic, fulfilling and humane future.

**Maintain a doable scale.** One of the negative effects of the doom-and-gloom scenarios, often associated with sustainability, is the sense that the problem is immensely overwhelming and the challenges seemingly endless. Is there anything we realistically can do? Where and how do we start? We need to reframe these scenarios by emphasizing how everything is interconnected, and whatever we do—no matter how small or apparently insignificant—can have an effect.

## The Power of Persuasive Stories

As marketers, our continuing challenge—especially in economically trying times—is to create strong and lasting bonds with current and potential customers. We must be adept in persuading them to act in ways that support our brands, products and companies. To do this well, we must capture their imagination—speaking to their hearts, as well as their minds. Stories are the fundamental way of doing this.

Leading companies today are researching stakeholder stories with several goals in mind:

- Create an emotionally compelling brand or company story used for advertising development.
- Identify the characteristics of an “emotional space” they want to own for brand strategy development.
- Identify the deep emotional drivers associated with a specific experience, used for operational improvements, personnel training and customer loyalty metrics.
- Identify the essence of corporate culture used to assess and plan for successful mergers.

Developing our persuasive story begins with a full understanding of what emotionally moves our audience. Narrative analysis is an immensely valuable technique for discovering and understanding these emotions, and for bringing them to life in the stories we tell about our brands and products. ■

## About the Authors

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## ■ Exhibit 4

Emotional triggers of sustainability



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